

## SUMMARIES

### The Book of Numbers: A Survey of Recent Research

*Henk Jagersma*

The history of research on the Book of Numbers since about 1990 is presented. Attention is devoted to the study of the book in its context, its historical background and its text. An annotated bibliography of recent monographs and commentaries is followed by a survey of studies on separate chapters and pericopes of the Book of Numbers. In the last part of this article special attention is paid to the theology of Numbers.

\*\*\*

### Amalek, the Vanguard of the *goyim*

*Egbert Rooze*

The texts in the book of Numbers about Amalek are extraordinary and specific. The title of the article is a translation of Numbers 24:20. This is quite a young text about Amalek, perhaps the youngest. Through Balaam's prophetic vision this text gives a biblical summarizing thesis about this 'first' of the nations: as vanguard of the *goyim*, Amalek always threatens and undermines Israel, as is characteristic of *goyim*, but in the end he will perish forever.

Words and meanings of this important verse are analysed and explained. The broader context of other Amalek pericopes is also dealt with. In the rebellion cycle of Numbers, Amalek is mentioned as well, especially in the chapters where the Israelites spied out the land of Canaan. Amalek appears here not only as an enemy who blocks Israel's way forward to the promised land, but also as a sign of the corruption that affected Israel itself. The struggle against Amalek reveals a rebellious opportunism of a part of Israel. Compared with other biblical chapters (Ex.17; 1 Sam.15), the fight against Amalek also reveals a right or wrong attitude of Israel. Therefore, Amalek is more than a concrete nation. The struggle with Amalek presents time and again the acid test for Israel's belief in which it becomes apparent how to tackle 'evil'.

\*\*\*

### The Balaam Episode in the Book of Numbers

*Aarnoud Jobsen*

The Balaam episode has an important place within the Book of Numbers. For a proper exegesis it is necessary to be aware of the literary styling of the various texts forming the Balaam episode. Style elements such as irony, satire, parody, sarcasm and persiflages are important. Therefore the text had many 'hidden meanings'. It is obvious that from the beginning Balak belongs to the 'bad guys'. Within the strict boundaries of the Balaam episode in Numbers 22-24 Balaam's role seems to be ambivalent. Other texts in the continuation of the story in Numbers and Deuteronomy make clear that Balaam's role is the one of an opponent of Israel, despite the fact that, by intervention of YHWH, he did utter prophecies of blessing for Israel. The hidden meanings found in the Balaam episode can give rise to a critical view on the third and fourth of Balaam's blessings, which at first sight seem to be positive. Are these prophecies unequivocal? Careful reading, particularly of the context, can lead to an

ambivalent interpretation, especially concerning the idea of power in these prophecies. Will Israel really be helped by a perspective of military supremacy over surrounding nations?

\*\*\*

### The Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6: Theology as Role Playing

*Eep Talstra*

The article addresses three topics relevant to the reader of the text of the priestly blessing in Numbers 6. First, the literary context, second the interaction of liturgy and blessing, third, difficulties of modern biblical theology in understanding to what the 'blessing' could refer in the area of creation and salvation.

The literary context emphasises the role of the priest as the one who expresses the Name in contrast to the role of YHWH who himself will perform the blessing. In the context of the liturgy, the question is raised why in some protestant traditions the blessing has been made democratic as 'public prayer'. Modern biblical theology seems to work from the assumption that religious language is always an expression of human beliefs and needs, so that even the blessing becomes an expression of the wishes of a community rather than words of God spoken by someone in office. In recent theology one can observe a renewed interest in the theme and the reality of blessing. There is a greater sensitivity for the dilemmas of life: is religion a matter of mere morality, or could ritual be equally important? Is religious language a matter of adding significance to human experiences, or is it also a way of expressing observed meaningfulness?

If the world we live in is creation, more than just neutral material, then the blessing of God and its expression by a community of faith is a meaningful action.

\*\*\*

### Absolute Distrust in YHWH: Numbers 13 and 14 as seen by the Author of Deuteronomy

*Cees Houtman*

After a comparison and an analysis of the history of the exploration of the land of Canaan in the description of Numbers 13-14, on the one side, and in its recapitulation in Deuteronomy 1:19-2:1, on the other, it is concluded that in Deuteronomy the former version has been reinterpreted radically. According to Numbers the exploration of the land was a mission instructed by YHWH. According to Deuteronomy it was an initiative of the Israelite people to be characterized as entirely negative. It was an overwhelming demonstration of Israel's lack of trust in YHWH which, moreover, made the people responsible for YHWH's anger at Moses with as a consequence Moses' participation in their judgement.

\*\*\*

### Costly Grace

*Dick Boer*

Numbers 16 deals with the 'impossible impossibility' of a liberation movement: leadership that develops into personal dictatorship, second rank functionaries seize power under the motto of a true revolution: 'this whole community is holy' (v.3), whereby the people turn to themselves against the project of liberation. It is obvious that the liberating God cannot make a revolution with his people, but

will have to destroy it. Due to the intervention of Moses and Aaron, God changes His mind: no liberation at the cost of the people. ‘Only’ the instigators of the counterrevolution are eliminated. Costly grace. Too costly perhaps? The Book of Numbers gives some indications that even this solution is not accepted. At the end of the book (31:49) ‘nobody is missing’ (play of words on the keyword פקד).

\*\*\*

### Desert Stories of Numbers in the Rabbinic Tradition

*Irene E. Zwiep*

When trying to reconstruct the ‘Werdegang’ of the desert stories in the Book of Numbers within the rabbinic tradition, the modern scholar soon encounters a series of methodological problems. First, the early rabbis seem to have had little interest in biblical stories as a whole. Their domain was that of the individual verse, which was usually expounded in various different ways and often incorporated in more than one rabbinic work. Second, modern scholarship itself appears no less ‘atomistic’ in its approach, in the sense that it is reluctant to treat the rabbinic tradition as a whole. Most modern studies rather discuss the individual rabbinic work and/or its manuscript sources. In an attempt to describe at least part of the rabbinic reception of the desert stories while at the same time avoiding methodological pitfalls, I have begun by analysing and commenting upon two previous accounts of the earliest commentary tradition on Numbers 11-17: James Kugel’s *The Bible as it was* (1997) and Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* (1911). After having reconstructed various early exegetical motifs and interpretative strategies on the basis of the material found in these two works, I have tried to formulate a slightly more general evaluation of the early rabbinic appreciation of the narrative in the Book of Numbers by focussing on one (exemplary) rabbinic interpretation of the ‘dialogical’ relation between the post-Sinai desert stories and those recorded in the book of Exodus.

\*\*\*

### The Blessing of Aaron (Num.6:22-27): In History and Tradition

*Willem A.M. Beuken*

Intended as no more than a short comment, this article is a contribution to a symposium held for the presentation of E. Talstra’s book: *Oude en Nieuwe Lezers* (Readers Old and New). In introducing his methodology, Talstra quotes the Aaronic blessing (Num.6:22-27). By means of a confrontation with the tradition of the text, Talstra looks at how the church fathers interpreted this blessing.

There is little Patristic material available. Theodoretus laid the foundation for the later Trinitarian interpretation of the blessing. Procopius builds upon this. Arabanus Maurus views the ecclesiastical priesthood as a continuation of the Aaronic priesthood. Strabo relates the Trinitarian significance of the blessing to the threefold mention of the Holy Name. In his reformation of the worship service, Luther drew upon Old Testament passages, such as the Aaronic blessing, which in his opinion Jesus also had made use of.

\*\*\*

The Desert as Metaphor: Pastoral and Homiletic Notes on the Desert Stories in Numbers  
*Bernard Rootmensen*

While Exodus is primarily concerned with exiting from Egypt and Joshua with entering Canaan, the stories in Numbers can best be read as tales of the passage through the desert. It is the school of hard knocks, where matters relating to 'Egypt' have to be unlearned and those relating to 'Canaan' learned. This process of purification is not limited to that time and place. The desert can be conceived of spiritually, as a continuously valid metaphor. The author is convinced that Numbers emerged during the Babylonian exile and thereafter. The book can be seen as a handbook for the edification of the congregation of that day. It was a time in which, in relation to religion, the people of Israel had to find new paths beyond all certainties and assumptions. In that light, the stories in Numbers can be seen as a trustworthy search guide in times of change.

The same holds true for our generation. In many respects the Christian community of faith finds itself in a situation comparable to that of the people of Israel during the passage through the desert. The author uses examples from Numbers to argue for the development of a contemporary 'desert theology' which could bring clarification, purification and encouragement to the present day reader.

\*\*\*

Easter in the Desert  
*Joop Boendermaker*

The best way to approach the Book of Numbers is from a liturgical point of view. Its central themes are human despair (cs. 11ff) and God's mercy (esp. 6:22). Because of these two aspects it can be seen as a paradigm of all worship, including modern liturgy.